The Invisible Generation?
Exploring the Role of Stereotypes in Employment Discrimination among
Children of Immigrants in Norway

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Arnfinn H. Midtbøen
Institute for Social Research
Po Box 3233 Elisenberg
N-0208 Oslo
Norway
E-mail: ahm@socialresearch.no

Although children of immigrants usually will have acquired fluency in the majority language as well as domestic educational qualifications and work experience, recent quantitative and experimental studies indicate that the ‘second generation’ experience discrimination in accessing entry-level jobs in Western European countries. In this article, I use data from forty-two in-depth interviews with Norwegian employers to explore the decision-making processes leading to the disadvantages observed. While economists and quantitatively oriented sociologists often favour theories of statistical discrimination when explaining discrimination of children of immigrants, the qualitative material suggests that employers use ethnically distinctive names as proxies for foreign education and lack of language proficiency – that is, stereotypes often associated with the immigrant experience. The implications for the employment opportunities of children of immigrants are potentially severe. Instead of experiencing equal access to the labour market, they encounter attitudes and stereotypes attached to their parents’ generation, making their domestic educational qualifications and linguistic fluency ‘invisible’ in the eyes of employers.

Key words: Ethnic discrimination; second generation; field experiment; employer interviews; stereotypes
Introduction

Post-war immigration to Western Europe has dramatically increased the magnitude of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity, and continues to do so, in what has been called ‘the age of migration’ (Castles & Miller, 2009). While the labour market integration of immigrants in European welfare states has been a matter of concern for decades, the degree to which children of immigrants have access to opportunity equal to their majority peers is one of the most pressing questions of today (Alba & Waters, 2011; Heath, Rothon, & Kilpi, 2008; Thomson & Crul, 2007). In contrast to their immigrant parents, the so-called second generation will usually have acquired fluency in the majority language as well as domestic educational qualifications and work experience. Insofar as the labour market disadvantages experienced by immigrants are being transferred to their children, this represents a major challenge both to the normative principle of equality of opportunity and the objective of social cohesion currently emphasised by most European governments.

Influential theoretical perspectives on second generation incorporation in the US point in somewhat contradictory directions. One branch of the literature predicts that immigrants and their descendants will be absorbed into mainstream society in several important aspects (Alba & Nee, 2003; see also Waldinger & Perlmann, 1998). Another important branch, usually referred to as segmented assimilation theory, suggests on the other hand that a large proportion of the second generation will experience downward mobility into more marginalised sectors of the economy (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Recent comparative studies of the second generation in Europe and the US document differences in education, unemployment and occupational attainment between both countries and different ethnic groups (Alba & Waters, 2011; Heath & Cheung, 2007). The general empirical picture, however, is that the children of immigrants in Europe are faring better than their parents, but that they still experience disadvantages compared to their majority peers (Heath et al., 2008). Furthermore, the barriers appear to be greatest at the entrance to the labour market, suggesting that discrimination constitutes an important part of the ‘ethnic penalties’ experienced by the second generation (ibid; see also OECD, 2010).

Rather than providing another empirical examination of the degree to which children of immigrants are disadvantaged in the access to labour market opportunities, this article builds on a field experiment in Norway demonstrating that ethnic discrimination of the second generation in fact occurs (Midtbøen & Rogstad, 2012b) and explores the decision-making processes leading to this adverse result. What makes up the underlying causes of discrimination is still a debated question (List, 2004; Midtbøen & Rogstad, 2012a; Pager &
Karafin, 2009; Reskin, 2000). According to economic models of statistical discrimination, for example, employers use mean characteristics of productivity for different groups as a way to deal with the limited information at hand in hiring processes (Arrow, 1973; Phelps, 1972). While such information can be a useful guide when evaluating job applicants for whom productivity-characteristics are hard to observe directly, recent studies of racial attitudes in the US have questioned the degree to which perceptions of mean differences are accurate reflections of reality (Pager & Karafin, 2009; Quillian & Pager, 2010). Drawing on social-psychological theories of the persistent character of racial stereotypes (e.g. Fiske, 1998), these studies suggest that employers stick to their negative views of stigmatised groups even when exposed to new information or positive experiences that contradict the stereotype in question.

To what extent can theories of stereotypes developed in a context of North American race relations shed light on processes of ethnic discrimination in Western European labour markets? I use data from forty-two in-depth interviews with Norwegian employers to explore important aspects of employer decision-making, including attitudes toward ethnic minorities, risk estimates, and the role of former experiences in evaluations of new applicants. The employers constitute a subsample of 900 firms in which hiring decisions were observed through a field experiment demonstrating that applicants with Pakistani names are severely disadvantaged compared to equally qualified majority applicants (Midtbøen & Rogstad, 2012b). Although not capturing the entire complexity of the processes leading to this result, the qualitative evidence supports the general theoretical framework of stereotypes in two ways. First, stereotypes about immigrants from developing countries seem to persist even when experiences should indicate a revision of the existing stereotype. Second, the stereotypes are transferred across generations, suggesting that children of immigrants encounter attitudes and prejudices attached to their parents’ generation at the entry level of the labour market.

I begin by describing key characteristics of post-war immigration to Norway, accounting for the preliminary research on how the second generation fares in education and the labour market. I then present theoretical perspectives on the degree to which employers’ perceptions of ethnic minorities represent accurate depictions of reality, and discuss the limits and possibilities of interview data in assessing the relevance of these theories. Next, I present the empirical results, illustrating the different ways in which employers draw on fixed ideas of immigrants when evaluating applicants in hiring processes. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings for the theoretical understanding of ascriptive inequality and the employment prospects for children of immigrants in Western Europe.
Immigrants and their children in Norway

Historically a country of emigration, Norway experienced a substantial influx of labour immigrants from countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, Morocco, and India in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Brochmann & Kjeldstadli, 2008). The early labour immigration was officially brought to an end by a so-called ‘immigration stop’ in 1975, but immigration kept increasing – first due to family reunification, later by refugees and political asylum seekers in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, since the EU enlargement in 2004 and 2007, the number of labour immigrants, primarily from Eastern Europe, has rapidly grown. As a result, immigrants and their children made up 13.1 per cent of the Norwegian population at the beginning of 2012. The largest group come from Poland, followed by immigrants from Sweden, Germany and Iraq. Among children of immigrants, 53 per cent had parents from Asian countries, and children of Pakistani origin constitute by far the largest group within the second generation.

Characterised as a ‘social-democratic’ welfare state type, defined by universal access to benefits and high levels of redistribution (Esping-Andersen, 1990), Norway represents a specific institutional context for migrant incorporation. Because legal newcomers are included in the social security system at the point of arrival, the sustainability of welfare arrangements depends on high employment rates (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2011). Due to strong trade unions and centralized collective agreements, however, the Norwegian labour market is associated with extensive employment protection and restrictions on temporary employment (Nergaard, 2010), making employment difficult to achieve for newly arrived immigrants. Still, the overall labour market outcomes of immigrants are relatively favourable in international comparison, although the employment gap between natives and the immigrant population as a whole seem to persist over time (OECD, 2012).

A question of increasing importance in Norway, as in most Western countries, concerns the educational and occupational outcomes for the children of immigrants. In Norway, this group is still quite young – in 2009, 70 per cent was younger than 25 years old (Olsen, 2011: 10) – but preliminary statistics point in optimistic directions. Norwegian-born children of immigrants are ‘active’ (i.e. in education or employment) on par with the majority at the same age levels, although there are differences between men and women and between ethnic groups (Olsen, 2011). Recent studies of the occupational attainment among the second generation in Norway suggests, however, that they experience disadvantages at the entrance to the labour market even when controlling for education and social background (Evensen, 2009; Hermansen, 2012). These findings are in line with results from both comparative
quantitative research and previous field experiments in the Western European context (e.g. Bursell, 2007; Carlsson, 2010; Fibbi, Lerch, & Wanner, 2006; Heath & Cheung, 2007; Kaas & Manger, 2012; Midtbøen & Rogstad, 2012b), suggesting that children of immigrants do experience discrimination in access to labour market opportunities.

**Statistical discrimination versus the role of stereotypes**

That discrimination seems to be most widespread at the point of initial hiring often lead economists and quantitatively-oriented sociologists to dismiss Becker’s (1957) traditional theory of taste-based discrimination in assessing the causes of discrimination, arguing instead in favour of statistical discrimination (originating from the works of Arrow 1973 and Phelps 1972; recent examples include Kaas and Manger 2012, and List 2004). Because hiring decisions often are made quickly, with limited information about each applicant and involving risks of hiring the wrong person, employers use social cues – e.g. the race of an applicant or an ethnically distinctive name – as proxies for productivity-relevant characteristics that are hard to observe directly. The widespread use of social cues in employment processes is also documented by important qualitative research on employers’ decision-making (e.g. Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; Moss & Tilly, 2001; Pager & Karafin, 2009).

While research on labour market disadvantages of the second generation have convincingly demonstrated that risk estimation and uncertainty are more important explanations than blatant ethnic prejudices, less attention is given to the assumption of accuracy inherent in the idea of generalised group characteristics. As pointed out by Pager and Karafin (2009) in an analysis of employers’ attitudes to African American job applicants in New York, the economic theory of statistical discrimination builds on a rational actor model which assumes that employers’ general beliefs about minority groups are based on accurate productivity-characteristics and prior experiences. Furthermore, to the extent that new experiences do not fit expectations based on the general beliefs about the group in question, the model presupposes that beliefs are updated through learning processes (Pager & Karafin, 2009: 73-74). Thus, by continuously improving the accuracy of group information, statistical discrimination according to Schwab (1986: 228) is discrimination based on a ‘true stereotype’ and hence efficient in economic terms.

The idea of ‘true’ stereotypes stands in stark contrast to Allport’s (1954) seminal work on the nature of prejudice, where a stereotype is defined as ‘an exaggerated belief associated with a category’ (191; see also Fiske, 1998). Rather than being accurate and continuously updated, stereotypes function as categorical justifications or rationalisations for rejecting (or
accepting) members of certain groups, as well as ‘a screening or selective device to maintain simplicity in perception and in thinking’ (Allport, 1954: 192). As Pager and Karafin (2009) demonstrate, the rational model of employer decision-making does not account for the persistence of stereotypes attached to African American job applicants: instead of leading to updated views about average group productivity, positive experiences with black employees are translated into ‘subtypes’ that do not affect the general stereotype at all. This finding is in line with social-psychological theories of the persistence of stereotypes, in which ‘the principle of least effort inclines us to hold to coarse and early-formed generalisations as long as they can possibly be made to serve our purposes’ (Allport, 1954: 176).

Whether theories of stereotypes developed in the context of North American race relations can shed light on the processes of ethnic discrimination in Western European labour markets is, however, an open question. On the one hand, one might argue that the US, with its history of slavery and, later on, the Jim Crow system of racial segregation and discrimination, constitutes a powerful ‘outlier’ which makes theories of racial stereotypes less relevant for other social and institutional contexts. Furthermore, the diversity of nationalities, immigration grounds, and generations represented among ethnic minorities may prevent the development of a general stereotype of ‘the immigrant’ and instead lead to more precise depictions of each group. On the other hand, the ‘principle of least effort’ could also result in even less accurate information of the productivity-characteristics of immigrants and their children. In Norway, for example, more than 200 different nationalities are represented and the rather uniform notion of the ‘immigrant population’ conceals large differences in education and employment rates between ethnic groups, and across generations. Whether employers are guided by ‘true stereotypes’ (Schwab, 1986) or ‘attribution errors’ (Reskin, 2008) when evaluating the quality of job applicants with ethnically distinctive names is thus an empirical question.

**Methods and data**

This study follows previous discrimination research based on qualitative employer interviews in the US (e.g. Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; Moss & Tilly, 2001; Pager & Karafin, 2009) with two important exceptions. First, it focuses on employers’ attitudes and experiences with immigrants and their children in a Western European context, which must be distinguished from studies of racial discrimination in the US. Second, the sample of employers consists of firms that were willing to be interviewed after being informed that their hiring practices had been observed through a field experiment, making the recruitment of informants distinct from most qualitative research.
Following a correspondence study design (see Pager, 2007; Riach & Rich, 2002), paired résumés and cover letters were sent to 900 job openings in Oslo and the surrounding area, measuring the extent to which applicants with Pakistani names – writing in fluent Norwegian and with their educational merits and work experience from Norway – are disadvantaged in their access to opportunity compared to equally qualified majority peers. 3 163 employers who had invited one or both of the candidates later received a letter informing about their participation in the field experiment, and inviting them to take part in in-depth interviews concerning recruitment and hiring practices. Forty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with employers representing a wide range of occupations in both private and public sectors, providing a response rate of 25 per cent. 4 Most informants were women (71 per cent), had ethnic majority background (93 per cent) and were themselves responsible for the hiring decision in the employment processes observed in the experiment (69 per cent). The interviews ranged in length from forty-five minutes to two hours, with the average interview lasting one hour. Every interview was tape-recorded, transcribed and coded in NVivo. Twenty-four interviews were conducted via telephone and the remaining eighteen via face-to-face interaction with employers.

Recruiting informants on the basis of a field experiment could bias the study in at least two ways. First of all, a direct selection effect would lead to an overrepresentation of employers inviting either both candidates or only the minority candidate for a job interview, resulting in a pool of informants whose hiring practices were greater than normally guided by principles of equal treatment. Additionally, investigating sensitive topics through qualitative interviews always involves the danger of social desirability bias in the answers provided. Because the informants were recruited on the basis of observed hiring practices, they might be particularly biased, either by confirming that a ‘positive’ outcome indeed was correct, or in insisting that a ‘negative’ outcome wrongly represented the firm’s employment procedures.

Although these potential problems do challenge the generalisability of the qualitative material, several factors suggest that they are not decisive. As Table 1 shows, the distribution of ‘outcome groups’ in the final pool of informants does not suffer from a direct selection effect; i.e. the representation of employers inviting either both candidates or only the majority candidate for an interview was equivalent to the total response rate. Furthermore, the number of negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities that were expressed in many interviews suggests that employers may be surprisingly frank in conversations with social scientists. This experience is in line with previous qualitative research on racial and ethnic attitudes from the US (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; Moss & Tilly, 2001; Pager & Karafin, 2009;
Waldinger & Lichter, 2003) and points to the relevance of studying people’s accounts in the understanding of complex social processes (Orbuch, 1997).

Table 1. *Informants by ‘outcome groups’ – numbers and proportions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome group</th>
<th>Number of informants</th>
<th>Proportion of informants</th>
<th>Number of letters sent in total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Both invited</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24.2 %</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only majority invited</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26.6 %</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only minority invited</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50.0 %</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>42</strong></td>
<td><strong>25.8 %</strong></td>
<td><strong>163</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviewing employers on the basis of field experimental results also has certain advantages. By using the overall results of the field experiment as a backdrop against the conversations on risk in hiring, former experiences with minority workers and attitudes toward policies and legislation preventing discrimination in employment processes, the qualitative material provides a novel glimpse into the factors shaping the perceptions of immigrants and their children in employer decision-making.

**Results**

The key finding from the field experiment was that applicants with Pakistani names suffer from significantly reduced labour market opportunities in Norway, compared to equally qualified applicants with majority backgrounds. As Figure 1 depicts, the minority candidate, although writing in fluent Norwegian and documenting both educational attainment and work experience in Norway, was invited to a job interview 31.9 per cent of the time while the majority applicant was invited 42.8 per cent of the time. This difference of 10.9 percentage points makes up a relative call-back gap of 25.8 per cent, which is statistically significant at the 1 per cent level (see Midtbøen & Rogstad, 2012b for a detailed account of the experimental results).
Because the employers selected for interviews constitute a subsample of the firms observed in the field experiment, the experimental data served as an important basis for the interviews. Besides detailed questions about recruitment procedures and screening strategies, and more general questions about risk, former experiences, and attitudes toward inclusion policies, the employers were asked to interpret the key finding from the field experiment; that is, what, in their view, could explain the patterns of hiring discrimination provided by the experiment?

**Imagining the causes of discrimination**

Employers’ responses may be grouped into two main categories. Some employers related the findings to individual characteristics of immigrants, such as poor language proficiency and lack of work ethic, resulting in employers’ reluctance to hire new employees with ethnic minority background. This rationale can be illustrated by the male manager of a private accounting firm, suggesting that discrimination in employment is the result of differences in attitudes to work in general:

> It may be high absenteeism, but it can also be work ethic or similar things [...] It depends on how many employees with a minority background you have. If you have one or two and you’re struggling with them, you would have that in mind next time you’re recruiting.

Another version of this category, exemplified here by the female manager of a private transport company, suggests that immigrants’ main concern is to take advantage of the
generous welfare system: ‘In our industry, many immigrants will only work till they’ve acquired their rights. Then they’ll stop and start exploiting the system.’

Although several employers refer to practices or attitudes among ethnic minorities when explaining the findings from the field experiment, surprisingly many point instead to external factors such as media representations of immigrants and to negative attitudes and uncertainty among employers. This other main category of explanations is expressed in various ways. A first example comes from an interview with two HR representatives of a public railroad company, of which one of them points to several factors influencing employers in hiring decisions:

It’s an attitudinal problem among Norwegians, our traditional attitudes. We must be fed with news showing a different picture; with less focus on crime and violence […]. It’s too much about all the turmoil in the world, ranging from suicide bombers to holy wars to… […]. I think that we’re shaped by the media to a far, far greater extent than we’re realising. We don’t call ourselves racists, but in practice that’s probably what we are.

While this informant points to traditional attitudes, negative media representations, and racism, others refer instead to risk aversion, uncertainty, and the well-known tendency among employers to hire candidates who share similar characteristics (i.e. gender and ethnicity in particular):

I think it’s caused by ignorance, and perhaps xenophobia. The fact that people actually don’t know… that they are unfamiliar with employees from other countries and might think it’s a little scary. I really think it’s a pity, but I think that’s the way it is.

The quotation above comes from an interview with the head of a municipal kindergarten in Oslo city centre. Another kindergarten representative, with long experience as head of an ethnically diverse workforce in eastern Oslo, answers the following when asked to comment on the findings from the experiment:

I think it’s correct. And that it’s all about … well, birds of a feather flock together. You feel safer with someone similar to you, and it’s easiest to assess the qualifications of those most similar to yourself. If you in addition don’t have much experience with immigrants, this will be the way it goes.

When asked to explain why employment discrimination against ethnic minorities takes place in the Norwegian labour market, the employers thus cluster in two main categories. One
category of explanations argues that discriminatory practices are due to individual shortcomings of ethnic minorities, a finding in line with previous research on explanations of racial disadvantages in the US labour market (e.g. DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy, & Post, 2011; Pager & Karafin, 2009). The other cluster, consisting of the majority of employers in the Norwegian data, pointed to structural factors like media representations of immigrants, racism, and risk aversion among employers themselves. Such factors are also reported by Pager and Karafin (2009), but were scarcely represented compared to individual-level explanations for racial inequality among American employers.

This difference vis-à-vis a similar study in the US may be an effect of the context of the qualitative interviews. The direct linkage between the field experiment and the interviews may have biased the answers by encouraging desirable or ‘political correct’ answers, or the link may have ‘forced’ the employers to think more thoroughly through the causes of discrimination than they would have in more traditional interview settings. Alternatively, the diverging findings may shed light on important differences between attitudes toward African Americans in a US context and attitudes toward ethnic minorities in a Norwegian context, suggesting, perhaps, important differences in the institutional context of stereotypes.

**Solving the problem of discrimination?**

At the end of each interview, the employers in the Norwegian sample were asked to comment on how the problem of discrimination – documented by the field experiment – could be addressed by policies or legal measures, if it should be addressed at all. On the basis of their generally self-critical explanations of why discrimination occurs, one might expect that the employers would suggest interventions related to these explanations. Interestingly, however, a different pattern of attitudes was apparent in these answers.

To be sure, some employers did mention anonymous applications as a way of dealing with the problem of call-back gaps, implying that associations with foreign names are important sources of inequality in employment. Others suggested more focus on good examples – and some believed in the visualisation of the ‘worst case’ firms as the best remedy, for themselves and as warnings to others. The vast majority of employers did, on the other hand, distance themselves from any measures committing them to any particular behaviour.

This skepticism took different forms. One of the most prominent was based on concerns for ‘what’s good for business’. As this manager of a private firm clearly states:
We must provide financial results related to business, we can’t worry about any ‘community economy’. We can’t take people in, train them and send them out in the labour market. That’s not that how we make money and that’s not how our shareholders imagined business when they started up the company either.

Other employers drew the line between small and large firms, arguing that smaller companies are forced to think about profit, while larger firms may commit to a wider community involvement. The following example is taken from an interview with the managing director of a small IT consulting company, describing why he had to reject an otherwise qualified job applicant because of lack of language proficiency:

I liked her very much, but I couldn’t ... I couldn’t take the risk. It is not our role. [...] If I choose the wrong candidate, it would be blocking for others who could have done a better job. So we have to be cynical. It's tough for those concerned, but it is my role as manager to make those decisions.

While these employers see little room for political intervention altogether, others expressed belief in policies directed outside the world of work. Some mentioned that the government should prevent ethnic segregation in housing or work toward the dissolution of immigrant gangs. Others suggested that efforts toward improving language proficiency should be intensified, either through school or by strengthening the extent of training programs. When asked directly about policies that could prevent discrimination, the CEO of an accounting firm said:

One should improve their language. Language should be in place before they enter the workplace, or at least to some degree. It's a balance there, but some knowledge of the language must be in place prior to entry into working life, while parts of it will be in place while you're at work. But you must have a minimum of language requirements to make yourself understood.

This employer relates to the general opinion that immigrants do suffer from poor language skills and that this is a major cause of ethnic inequality in the Norwegian labour market. Others, however, were more concerned about language proficiency among children of immigrants:

The main challenge is that in some schools, there are only one or two ethnic Norwegians. That means that children of immigrants don’t learn the language properly. Basically, it's the integration policy that has failed in Norway.
Common for most of the proposals about how to address the problem of discrimination is the implicit (and sometimes explicit) notion that ethnic minorities represent a problem, either by referring to the importance of profit or by suggesting that integration policies have failed. The discrepancy between what employers conceive of as probable causes of discrimination (i.e. prejudice, uncertainty, etc.) and the solutions proposed is therefore somewhat puzzling. Except for the few incidences in which anonymous applications were mentioned, none of the suggested remedies had any direct link to the diagnosis of the problem of discrimination or would affect the demand side of the labour market directly. Rather, most employers were skeptical to the idea that policies could, in one way or the other, limit their autonomy in hiring processes, and they proposed instead a more efficient integration policy.

Of course, there exists an extensive literature revealing similar discrepancies. For example, both surveys and qualitative interviews measuring attitudes toward African Americans demonstrate strong support of principles of equal treatment, but minimal support for policies put forward to improve the situation for minorities (e.g. Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; DiTomaso et al., 2011; Schuman & Krysan, 1999). Furthermore, the discrepancy is seemingly consistent with the theory of statistical discrimination: discrimination against qualified applicants on the basis of ethnicity is unfair and caused by prejudice, but would not take place if the members of these groups on average had been better qualified. Hence, governmental bodies should concentrate on improving the basic skills minorities bring into the market rather than imposing new restrictions limiting the autonomy of employers (see e.g. Carneiro, Heckman, & Masterov, 2005; Heckman, 1998; Neal & Johnson, 1996 for this view).

However, for the theory of statistical discrimination to fully cover the findings documented here, there must be a close connection between the perceptions of productivity, leading in many cases to employment discrimination and to the employers’ recommendations for future policies, and the actual average productivity of minority workers. In other words: are the perceptions of immigrants and their children implicit in these interviews guided by statistical ‘facts’ and direct experiences – or by ethnic stereotypes?

Generalising bad experiences – between groups and across generations

Negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities were rather frequently expressed by the employers in this sample. However, the degree to which these attitudes reflect direct experiences or draw on stereotypical images of ‘the immigrant’ is often hard to assess. In some cases, statements are obviously not based on experiences, as illustrated by this manager of a transport company:
‘Often, men with ethnic minority backgrounds have difficulties respecting female leaders. But I must point out, I haven’t experienced that myself.’ Similarly, quite broad generalisations are expressed to pinpoint how cultural differences may lead to difficulties in working life, like this statement from the male principal of an elementary school:

Immigrants may have some education from their home country and they may have it converted, but it still doesn’t work. It's a great cultural difference. The Norwegian society… we're raised to understand the concept of democracy, that is, to be independent, take responsibility... When it comes to other cultures, it's not like that. They have more authoritarian systems.

At other times, it may be harder to draw the distinction between experiences and stereotypes. Negative attitudes may be specific to certain nationalities or groups within the general immigrant category. In this example, an employer otherwise positive toward immigrants as part of the Norwegian working life demonstrates how negative experiences may shape attitudes toward particular groups:

Employer (E): I have to say, there are certain countries I just stay away from...
Interviewer (I): Okay ... which ones?
E: Well, it's basically the Horn of Africa. Due to the experiences we’ve had with people coming from that area.
I: Okay ... do you primarily mean Somalis, or..?
E: Yes, Somalis in particular.
I: Okay. What kind of bad experiences?
E: So… we’ve been seriously threatened by the three people we’ve had here. I’m sure there are some good people from there too, but I’ve got to be honest and say that I’ll never hire someone from Somalia again ... They really have some attitudes that are far out compared to our way of life.
I: Right. Do you have similar experiences with other country groups too?
E: No. No. And, I mean, there are several stupid Norwegians too. I guess, in all countries. But when it comes to the Horn of Africa, we have particularly bad experiences.
I: Right.
E: But we have good people from more or less all other countries; from Gambia to Persia… that is, to Iran, to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Poland and Lithuania and everything like that. But the Horn of Africa differs. And I will include Ethiopia and Eritrea as well.

Group distinctions are also made without specific reference to dramatic experiences, often drawn between Nordic or European immigrants and others, like in this example:
E: We're getting very familiar with Swedish and Polish immigrants, but obviously… if Chinese and Indian people would start applying, they would probably meet greater skepticism. To invite them for an interview would require special circumstances.
I: Do you think that people with a non-Western immigrant background would have to be more qualified to succeed in the competition with other candidates?
E: They have to at least be as good and maybe even better.

The idea that ethnic minorities most prove *more productive* than majority applicants to be considered equally qualified in competing for the same positions is widespread among the informants, and consistent with earlier research (e.g. Collins, 2011). Sometimes, as in the previous example, the distinctions are made between immigrants from different parts of the world. At other times, however, the lines are drawn more broadly:

To put it this way: if you have a minority background, you have to take a few steps up compared to the average Norwegian. If you are handicapped or you are a first or second generation immigrant, you have ... you really have to take a step up in relation to the other candidates.

Introducing the second generation in the equation makes an interesting case when assessing the degree to which employers are guided by accurate group-characteristics or stereotypes when evaluating candidates for a listed position. This particular employer had one person with an immigrant background employed, a female accounting assistant from Ukraine; otherwise, he had no experiences with ethnic minorities of any generation. Still, immigrants, their children, and the ‘handicapped’ are considered equally unemployable, indicating that applicants with foreign-sounding names would have to prove exceptionally qualified to receive a call-back for a job interview from this employer.

Because the fictitious résumés and cover letters in the field experiment signalled that the minority applicants were of the second generation, it was particularly relevant to investigate the degree to which the generational distinction was drawn by employers. A few employers pointed out the differences in language proficiency between the first and the second generation, making them particularly aware of the generational gap when evaluating new candidates. The vast majority of the informants in this sample had, however, no experience with the second generation, but demonstrated a striking tendency to generalise from a foreign name to the immigrant experience and, in particular, to a presumed lack of language proficiency.

When asked to reflect upon the possible reasons why the candidate with majority background received a call-back for a job interview, for example, the manager of a nursing
home outside of Oslo referred to a common language as the most important feature to preserve: ‘We’ll look after the diversity we already have, but will not destroy it by hiring too many non-Western employees at the same section.’ Others point to negative experiences with bad applications: ‘You know, immigrants receiving unemployment benefits are required to apply for all the jobs they can find… […] …you just have to sort them out.’ Furthermore, there are several explicit statements suggesting that a job application, well-written and in fluent Norwegian but signed with a foreign name, may awake suspicion in itself: ‘I get sceptical when I get an application from someone with an Urdu name that is written in fluent Norwegian… has he written it himself or has he not?’ These citations reflect the poor knowledge of the second generation as prospective employees among many Norwegian employers, and suggest that negative experiences and stereotypes attached to foreign names are generalised not only between different immigrant groups but across generations.

Discussion and conclusion
The findings presented in this article serve as reminders of the complex processes characterising employer decision-making. Hiring involves risk, and choosing the wrong candidate may have consequences for profit and work environment. Furthermore, employers will often be confronted with a large number of applicants for a listed job, and in most hiring processes they will have to make quick decisions based on limited information about each candidate. In these situations, employers make use of social cues – e.g. race and ethnicity – to define and categorise the applicants at hand. Part of that categorisation is inevitable, automatic and unconscious, as documented by decades of social-psychological research (see Fiske, 1998). Another part is conscious and made on the basis of the knowledge, experiences and general beliefs employers have about the group to which candidates are ascribed membership.

None of these characteristics of employment processes are controversial. The scholarly debates begin when assessing the extent to which hiring decisions primarily reflect conscious versus unconscious categorisation processes (Agerström & Rooth, 2009; Bertrand, Chugh, & Mullainathan, 2005; Petersen, 2008; Quillian, 2006, 2008; Reskin, 2008; Tetlock & Mitchell, 2008), and when discussing the accuracy of the general beliefs employers have about different minority groups. Often with racial discrimination in US as a starting point, economists tend to assume a rational actor model of employer decision-making, where differential treatment of African Americans is explained partly with reference to the lower average productivity characteristics of this group, and partly with reference to negative experiences (see Arrow 1973, Phelps 1972 and Schwab 1986 for the theoretical foundations
of this theory). Sociological and social-psychological models have, on the other hand, questioned the extent to which employers possess ‘true’ knowledge of average productivity, suggesting instead that deep-seated stereotypes of African Americans may provide an important explanation for the persistence of racial discrimination in the US (Pager & Karafin, 2009; Quillian & Pager, 2010).

Analysing the ways in which Norwegian employers refer to ethnic minorities in conversations about employments, this article suggests that the general framework of stereotypes do shed light on processes leading to ethnic inequality, in at least two ways. First, negative experiences are often generalised across groups. Although the rational actor model allows for experiences with individuals to shape general beliefs about the group to which the individual is considered a part, an important question seldom addressed in theoretical discussions is the scope of that generalisation. In the material presented here, there are several versions. In some cases, negative experiences with individuals originating from a single country (e.g. Somalia) are used as justifications for future rejections of applicants also from neighbouring countries (e.g. Eritrea and Ethiopia). At other times, the negative experience may be generalised to the broader category of ‘non-Western’ countries, increasing the number of groups with poor employment possibilities dramatically. In a third variant, the second generation is included in the category to which a negative experience is generalised. These examples indicate that the scope of generalisation should be carefully scrutinised when assessing the relevance of statistical discrimination in explaining ethnic disadvantage in occupational outcomes.

That the employers in this sample often include children of immigrants in their general beliefs about ethnic minorities directs the attention to a second way in which the rational actor model overestimates the accuracy in employers’ assessment of group-productivity. Statistically speaking, there are large differences in the average productivity across generations. Although the educational attainment of the second generation varies by national context (Heath et al., 2008), in countries like Norway, children of immigrants from developing countries are close to the majority in school performance and number involved in higher education, and some groups even outperform their majority peers (Olsen, 2011). Still, economists and quantitatively-oriented sociologists tend to favour the theory of statistical discrimination when explaining disadvantages experienced by the second generation, as if average productivity were highly different. Interestingly, a recent field experiment in Sweden (Carlsson, 2010) documented ethnic discrimination in employment, but found no significant difference between applicants of the first and second generation. This finding suggests that
employers use foreign names as proxies for immigrant stereotypes and that they are unable to distinguish between generations. To the extent that this provides a relevant explanation for the discrimination documented by field experiments and comparative research, these findings are disturbing for both scholars and politicians trying to understand and remedy the reproduction of ethnic disadvantage currently experienced by the children of immigrants in Western Europe.

Obviously, the second generation is still quite young and the poor knowledge of this group documented in interviews with Norwegian employers may be a direct consequence of the fact that they have simply not reached the full occupational spectrum of their parents’ destination country. An optimistic scenario thus suggests that increasing knowledge of the achievements of the second generation will make employers more aware of the variation within the ‘ethnic minority’ category, making ethnicity less decisive in shaping employment opportunities in the European context in the longer run than race has proved in the US. More research is needed to explore whether the stereotypes documented in this article will diminish as the majority population gains more knowledge of generational differences, or if the persistent influx of new immigrants will lead to the maintenance of existing stereotypes, and continue to shape the opportunities for labour market inclusion of children of immigrants in the years to come.
Notes

1. Broadly defined, the second generation consists of both individuals that are born in their immigrant parents’ destination country and individuals that immigrated before adolescence. This latter group may also be referred to as the 1.5 generation, narrowing the term ‘second generation’ to individuals born in a country with at least one foreign-born parent. Following Alba and Waters (2011), Thomsen and Crul (2007) and Portes and Rumbaut (2005), however, I will use the broad definition of the second generation in this article.

2. In 2009, children of Pakistani immigrants constituted 34.3 per cent of the second generation in Norway, followed by children of immigrants from Vietnam (12.1 per cent), Turkey (9.5 per cent), and India (6.4 per cent) (Olsen 2011: 11).

3. Pakistani names were chosen to operationalise ‘ethnic minority background’ in the field experiment because individuals with Pakistani origin constitute the largest and oldest group among children of immigrants in Norway and currently are entering the labour market.

4. One might argue that a response rate of only 25 per cent is challenging the generalisability of the results. Given the sample strategy, in which employers made contact and approved to be interviewed after receiving a letter informing them that their hiring practices had been observed by researchers, we do however find this response rate to be quite satisfactory.
References


